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Confidence Booster and Career Determination Factor: What Clothing Means to People Living with a Physical Disability

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People living with a disability (PLWD) are no different than people living without a disability who wish to participate in society and accomplish life goals that amplify their well-being. These life goals often include finding employment, receiving an education, finding a home, establishing meaningful relationships, and achieving overall health and well-being. However, disability often has a negative impact on the accomplishment of these goals because PLWD frequently face barriers, such as lack of appropriate clothing that prevent them from accomplishing these goals (Kabel, McBee-Black, & Dimka, 2016). Moreover, PLWD often face stigma associated with their physical disability that may stem from prior discrimination. This stigma may become anticipatory of their disability (Corrigan et al., 2009; Schur, 2002) which can impact their participation.

Labeling theory addresses the negative impact of being “labeled” disabled on the accomplishment of life goals. Labeling is defined as placing a label on someone by another person or group of people that can cause discrimination and devaluation, in turn, interfering with pursuing life goals and full participation (Rosenfield, 1997). PLWD form self-stigma when they are “labeled” which is associated with the acknowledgement, agreement, and internalization of the negative stereotypes about themselves (Kao et al., 2016). It has been referred to as the “why try” effect (Corrigan, Larson, & Rusch, 2009, p.75). PLWD may experience this, preventing full participation. Further, PLWD have additional challenges to workforce participation due to lack of appropriate clothing in the workplace. To investigate the impact of clothing on workplace participation an exploratory study was developed using the frameworks of labeling theory and the construct of self-stigma.

The data were collected via individual interviews using semi-structured, open-ended questions. Research interviews are useful when a study focuses on determining specific phenomena related to the participants and when exploratory work is required before a quantitative study can be completed (King, 1994). Four interviews were conducted in a Midwestern community over a three-week period in 2017. Cognitively-intact, English-speaking, adult PLWD, who have worked, or who are working, or who have sought or are seeking employment were recruited for this study. The sample included wheelchair users and users of other devices (i.e. canes). Participants were asked to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences with working or seeking work as a PLWD and to discuss how clothing impacted their workforce participation. The interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Two major themes emerged.

Clothing – Confidence Booster. All participants stated that when their clothing options are limited they feel less confident in their ability to do their job effectively or be “taken seriously.” They stated that clothing is important to them and discussed the need to dress “appropriately” for their job. One participant stated that finding appropriate shirts is critically important to his confidence level. His wheelchair is self-propelled so if his shirt cuffs are worn and look “ragged,” he feels “embarrassed.” Another participant stated that his mother insisted he wear “respectable and appropriate” clothing from a young age. This participant has muscular dystrophy and has progressed from not needing a wheelchair to currently using a wheelchair. His clothing options are “extremely important” to his confidence level and believes that he will not be taken seriously in the workplace if he is not dressed “appropriately.” **Dress Codes-Cue for Future Job.** For three of the four participant’s, workplace participation consists of many types of jobs in many industry areas. All participants had been in the workplace for 10-15 years and all are currently working for disability-centered organizations. Three participants working for an organization that supports PLWD said that they have fewer barriers to workplace participation related to clothing. When asked about the role clothing played in previous occupations, the situation was much different. Two participants stated that having knowledge of a required dress code was “a necessity” and determined whether they would apply for the job.

The results of this exploratory study provide critical evidence for continued research. As anticipated, each participant had different clothing needs based on their physical disability. However, there was consensus among all participants, regardless of disability, that lack of appropriate clothing impacted their ability to fully participate in the workplace. Clothing boosted their confidence and dress codes impacted their career choices. Further research is needed to discover consistency or divergence among the themes and to shed light into both physical and psychological needs for appropriate clothing to help PLWD fulfill their life goals through full social participation by removing clothing-related barriers.

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